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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

15 November 2005

BELARUS: "Religious events should be in a house of worship, not on the street"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

State authorities have insisted to Forum 18 News Service that religious literature was lawfully confiscated from a street library in eastern Belarus. Bobruisk City Executive Committee vice-chairman Mikhail Kovalevich told Forum 18 that the Baptists had both "ignored" and "violated" the legal procedure for holding religious events by acting without state approval. "Religious events should be in a house of worship, not on the street," he stated about the street evangelism. The Baptists have been told by the head of the local state Ideology Department that the confiscated literature - including copies of the New Testament - would be sent for expert analysis and might not be returned at all, and that a court will soon resolve the issue. In another recent case, a Baptist in Brest has been fined for leading an unregistered religious organisation. Local Baptists have protested against this, pointing out that, under Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religionâ€¦ everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association."

Local state representatives have insisted to Forum 18 News Service that religious literature was lawfully confiscated from a street library in the city of Bobruisk [Babruysk] (Mogilev [Mahilyow] region) in eastern Belarus in late September. The library was run by Baptists belonging to the Council of Churches, who refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries.

Bobruisk City Executive Committee vice-chairman Mikhail Kovalevich said that the literature was currently being held by an administrative commission – he was unable to say precisely which – because the Baptists had both "ignored" and "violated" the legal procedure for holding religious events by acting without state approval. "Religious events should be in a house of worship, not on the street," he told Forum 18 on 14 November. Kovalevich also stressed that no action had yet been taken against the Baptists and maintained that it would not take the form of a court case.

Valeri Sidorenko, an assistant to Mogilev Region's main religious affairs official, told Forum 18 on 14 November that he had no information about this specific case. He did clarify, however, that the operation of a street library by unregistered Baptists would have violated Article 193 of the Administrative Violations Code, "because distributing literature counts as one form of their religious activity." Article 193 punishes unregistered religious activity – illegal under the 2002 religion law – with fines of up to five times the minimum monthly wage (i.e. up to 120,000 Belarusian Roubles, 357 Norwegian Kroner, 45 Euros or 53 US Dollars). Sidorenko also told Forum 18 that he thought such a fine would be handed down by an administrative commission rather than a court.

A police captain threatened Aleksandr Yermalitsky of the unregistered Bobruisk congregation with 15 days' detention or a fine equivalent to 135 US Dollars (291,375 Belarusian Roubles, 890 Norwegian Kroner, or 115 Euros) after he confiscated all the street library's literature on 25 September, the Baptist Council of Churches stated on 22 October. For two weeks Yermalitsky's attempts to have the literature returned met with no response, until, on 11 October, the head of the local Ideology Department reportedly informed him that it would be sent for expert analysis and might not be returned at all, and that a court would soon resolve the issue. On 14 November a secretary at Bobruisk City Executive Committee told Forum 18 that many evangelical churches have sent letters of petition regarding the situation.

Aleksandr Yermalitsky thinks that there will definitely be a court case against him but, speaking to Forum 18 on 27 October, said that he had no idea when it would be. Reluctant to comment further, he did say that the Bobruisk Baptists did not consider themselves guilty of any violation and were hopeful that the literature – which included copies of the New Testament – would be returned.

This is not the first time the authorities have cracked down on a Baptist street library (see F18News 20 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=436). Religious believers in Belarus can also be fined for holding religious gatherings in private homes (see eg. F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=463) and the activity of even registered local religious organisations is – as one regional official insisted to Forum 18 on 14 November 2005 - confined to the immediate area where they are registered, such as a particular city (see the F18News religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478).

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State registration is - against international human rights standards - compulsory for all religious communities and unregistered religious activity is illegal. This policy has been condemned by the UN Human Rights Committee, following a complaint brought by two Hare Krishna devotees (see F18News 4 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=682). The policy is used against a variety of communities the state dislikes, such as non-Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox communities (see F18News 9 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=684).

In another recent case brought under the Administrative Violations Code, a member of the Brest Baptist congregation in western Belarus, also belonging to the Council of Churches, was reportedly fined 127,500 Belarusian roubles (379 Norwegian kroner, 49 Euros or 57 US dollars) by a local administrative commission on 20 October for leading an unregistered religious organisation in violation of Article 193 of the Code. This is over five times the monthly minimum wage. On 28 October, the Baptists called for prayer and petitions, "that the authorities will not force the church to register, as this goes against our Christian conscience, the Gospels and the Belarusian Constitution."

Under Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as the Brest Baptists point out, "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religionâ€¦ everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association." (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at
http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at
http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru

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